

## **Vision 21 Implementation Committee**

### **Meeting Minutes**

**Thursday, March 2, 2006**

Members Present: Austin Bliss, Donna Brescia, Vinnie DeNovellis, Victoria Haase, Sara Oaklander, Meg O'Brien, Jennifer Page, Ann Rittenburg, Paul Santos, Jay Szklut

Members Absent: Paul Solomon

Others Present: Delores Keefe, Jeffrey Wheeler

#### 1. Administrvia

The meeting was called to order at 7:05 pm by Chair Jennifer Page.

Victoria Haase agreed to serve as recorder.

Minutes from the February 2, 2006 meeting were unanimously approved

#### 2. Discussion: The Business Initiative

Jennifer identified the focus of this meeting to be a continuation of "Business Initiatives" and introduced Jeffrey Wheeler who is Planning Coordinator for the Town of Belmont

2.1 Presentation: Mr. Wheeler distributed a handout titled "Update on Improvements to Permitting Process as of March 2, 2006." The document contained "an overview of the changes that have occurred within the Office of Community Development as a result of its review of permitting processes and procedures."

Mr. Wheeler's presentation included the following points:

2.1.1 Procedures and documents – Initially the processes for permitting were identified and various forms were developed or updated to help guide people through the permitting process. These included: "Opening a New Business;" "Building Permits and Construction Process;" and various ZBA and Planning Board forms and descriptions of process and procedures. A single database has been developed for licenses so that the information is standardized. All information including applications are now available on the Town's website which is updated regularly.

2.1.2 Communication – Mr. Wheeler in his role as Planning Coordinator is the de facto point of contact on zoning questions. He is working to improve communication within and between relevant Town departments, Boards and Commissions. He serves as the liaison between potential business owners and all relevant town departments and committees. He has participated in the drafting of decisions rendered by town boards and reviews every denial letter to be sent out. He often coordinates meetings, which bring together representatives from various departments that will be involved in the decision making as well as the Planning and Economic Development Manager, Fire Department, Police Department, and Town Treasurer.

2.1.3 Training/Education – Staff members in the Office of Community Development can answer general questions and can assist and guide applicants who come to apply regarding the steps necessary.

2.1.4 Zoning By-Law Amendments – The current Zoning by-laws were written in 1988 and were deliberately crafted at that time to favor abutters and neighbors. Although resident input is still valued, a more moderate position is emerging at present and is under consideration by the ZBA and Planning Board. An example of how the bylaws have evolved is that in the past all establishments that sold food were considered restaurants. At present there are different classifications used to distinguish between convenient stores, candy shops, and businesses selling sandwiches or ice cream. Both the Planning Board and the ZBA are both committed to increased cooperation between the town and potential new businesses. Discussion is ongoing about possible amendments to the by-laws such as making the language of the current by-laws easier to understand; addressing the “split-zoning” of parcels listed as both commercial and residential, and increasing the density of commercial areas.

## 2.2 General Questions and Discussion with Mr. Wheeler

2.2.1 The question was asked, what improvements were being made in the residential areas? Mr. Wheeler responded by stating that 85% of the builders who work in the town know what the Belmont Inspectors will be looking for. Although the question of customer service is in some ways subjective, making experiences varied, the process is based on cooperation between those doing the work and those responsible for enforcing the regulations. The Office of Community Development is open to suggestions as how they can improve their services.

2.2.2 The question was asked, are there more businesses opening in Belmont as a result of these changes? Mr. Wheeler responded by saying that he believed that the benefits from the changes in the process could be seen, for example, along Trapelo Road where new stores have been opened providing a greater variety of businesses such as the fudge store, Angelato's, Bead Work, and an antiques shop.

2.2.3 Liquor Licenses – The issue of liquor licenses is currently under discussion. Belmont has a limited number of licenses with a restriction of 39 seats required in the establishment. Question: Would more available licenses bring more restaurants to Belmont? Reponse: the number of licenses is not the only factor. Zoning and parking also need to be considered. For example, in Belmont there is no provision for parking in neighborhood areas on streets that abut business districts.

2.2.4 “Desirable” businesses? Mr. Wheeler stated that the most frequent requests made by residents concerning desirable businesses in Belmont are for convenience stores that sell everyday items, restaurants with liquor licenses, and a specialty store that would sell wine and cheese.

2.2.5 The question was asked, how do we generate income while building community? Mr. Wheeler responded by saying that the sale of liquor licenses produces income, that a prosperous business in town is taxed at a higher rate, and that successful businesses generate more business in the area and increase the value of the homes in the surrounding neighborhoods. He referred to the Vision Committee's "Business Friendly Report", noting the section, "Belmont's Business Community: Why is it Important to our Town?"

2.2.6 Mr. Wheeler was thanked for his presentation.

### 2.3 General Comments –

2.3.1 Sara Oaklander suggested a look back at the progression of answering the question, Is Belmont Business Friendly? The process which was begun by the Vision 21 Committee in 2002 produced a gradual shift in the general mindset of residents about how to balance the concerns of residents with those in the business community. The phrase "Business Friendly" has been adopted around town and is used frequently as a focal point in discussing the improvements that have been made. This positive progress includes developing step-by-step instructions available to potential business owners regarding the permitting/licensing process, and better communications between all town departments. Although the work of BEDPG has been completed, the recently appointed Belmont Center Planning Group has responded to the charge of comprehensive planning in Belmont Center and will hold upcoming public input hearings in April.

2.3.2 Planning and Economic Development Manager Jay Szklut, was asked to comment on the presentation and discussion. He comments included these points:

- We need to think about how we want the Town to develop before we encourage zoning changes. This leads to the issue of Master Planning, which should be at the forefront of any discussion.
- Other major concerns are parking and traffic, which are currently being studied.
- Also under consideration are rezoning changes in Cushing Square, an initiative of the Planning Board. Public input will be sought through meetings with residents and business owners in the area.
- The subject of liquor licensing is also being discussed by the Board of Selectmen.
- There is a need for private sector leadership: The problem is not always a lack of initiative of the town departments. Private-sector leadership should be encouraged that can provide the intense time and energy needed. He spoke in favor of creative partnerships and gave the example of how a group of Norwood residents put together a plan for a new skating rink in cooperation with the YMCA which benefited all involved and didn't cost the town any money to build.

2.4 Next steps? Jennifer Page asked those present to consider if we were ready to recommend possible next steps in the business initiative. Are there other groups in town more appropriate to follow up? What specific recommendations in the March '05 BEDPG report can we help the town implement? Shall we take more time to determine the status of each individual recommendation or are we satisfied with what is currently

being done? The Committee agreed that Jennifer Page and Sara Oaklander would take the “cluster or recommendations” and summarize or suggest possible steps to take.

### 3. Welcoming Booklet

Victoria Haase reported that all editing changes that were received from members of the committee had been completed. The disc containing the text was turned over to Chair Jennifer Page. Victoria expressed her concerns that the process of reproducing the booklet has not seemed to be a priority for the group despite the initial time frame that was decided on to have the job completed in April. Since the initial contact was made with Mr. Vadaro at Minuteman High School in January it is not certain that he will be able to commit his students to the project at this late date. As previously reported by Victoria the estimate quoted in February for the printing cost was \$2400.00 and for the binding cost was \$ 621.00

### 4. Upcoming Events: Requests for Volunteers

March 8- Sustainable Belmont will host a forum on Lawn Care and Pesticides  
V21 Committee members were each given several flyers to distribute

March 9, March 29, and The Conservation Commission will hold presentations on the proposed Wet Lands Bylaw. V21 Committee members were asked to help by observing and recording the discussions

April 4, April 6, and April 12 - Sustainable Belmont will host 3 forums on the Belmont Climate Action Plan; V21 Committee members were asked to attend and help with various tasks at the meetings.

5. The next meeting of VIC. The designated focus of the meeting will be the Environmental Initiative, and the co-chairs of Sustainable Belmont will meet with us for an hour. Committee members also requested that we spend some time starting to look ahead at possible projects for the committee to engage in.

6. The meeting was adjourned at 9:10 pm.

Minutes respectfully submitted by Victoria Haase, Secretary Pro Tempore